

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE SUBJECT: SECURITY FORCES CAPACITY
BUILDING IN IRAQ BRIEFER: COLONEL MICHAEL FULLER, MNSTC-I CHIEF OF STAFF
MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE
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MR. HOLT: Colonel Fuller, welcome to the Bloggers' Roundtable. Colonel
Fuller is the chief of staff of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-
Iraq.

And Colonel, we're ready when you are, so the floor is yours.

COL. FULLER: Okay. Thanks, Jack.

Well, first of all, welcome, everybody. Glad to talk to you today. If
there's a little background noise here as we start out, I apologize. We've got
several rocket attacks going on here right at the moment, and so we've got
alarms going off and if you hear an explosion or two, hopefully it won't be too
close to the interview here. So -- as Jack said, my name's Colonel Mike Fuller.
I'm the chief of staff of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, and
our command here has the primary mission of working with the two Iraqi security
ministries -- the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior -- to help
generate, sustain, replenish Iraqi security forces that include folks like the
army, the navy, the air force, the special operations forces, and all of the
forms of police that are employed here in Iraq, as well as we take on trying to
improve the performance of the two security ministries in just the way they go
about managing and resourcing the Iraqi security forces that are trying to
stabilize the situation here in Iraq

And so we've worked very hard. I've been here for 11 months now. We've
been working very hard towards those goals, and I think we've made some
significant progress that the surge has allowed us to take advantage of:
consolidating some of the gains as a result of the improve security situation
and generating more Iraqi security forces -- almost 124,000 new army, navy,
airmen, policemen this year that we've put out onto the battlefield and out
there in the streets and homes and neighborhoods here in Iraq. And so we've
worked very hard to do that.

And so we'll continue to work on that as we go throughout the year and
take advantage of the improved security situation, despite the fact that we've
got a rocket attack going on right at this very moment.

So having said that, hey, I'm a 30-year Army veteran myself. Like I
said, I've been here 11 months and would be happy to entertain any questions you

all might have that could help clarify the situation with regard to exactly what we've got going on here in Iraq as it pertains to MNSTC-I's mission.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much and thank you for being with us, especially in light of the current events there.

Andy, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started, please?

Q Yes, sir. Please bear with me. I have three questions.

My first question, what is the plan to integrate new Iraqi security forces as U.S. brigades draw down? My second question is how are the Ninevah and Basra operations commands performing? And then my third question is more specific: how are the Iraqi security forces currently maneuvering through the battle space? And I really just referring to U.S. -- how troops from Karbala and, I believe, also from the 8th Iraqi army division managed to get to and from the fight down in Basra?

COL. FULLER: Okay. Well, let me take, Andi, your last question first, and how are the -- particularly in light of current operations, the Iraqi security forces moving. Actually, this is a very good-news story in terms of some of those improvements we've talked about over the past year, in that they move the better part of almost two brigade-size forces, and that's somewhere between 5 (thousand) and 8,000 folks to Basra and down earlier to Karbala, when they went there, all on their own, without any help from us. We didn't provide any trucks; we didn't provide any planes, we didn't provide anything. The Iraqis planned, coordinated it, and executed that move on their own.

So this is just an indicator of the fact that, more and more so -- and particularly in light of drawdown of five brigade combat teams -- that the Iraqis are beginning to be able to step up to the plate and execute operations on their own.

In terms of what's going on down in Basra, I highlighted that. This is one of the new divisions that we just stood up this year; the 14th division is headquartered in Basra. And then the 8th and 10th division are both close by down there in adjacent provinces. And so the 14th division is the division that's there with three brand-new brigades that we stood up this year.

And Prime Minister Maliki decided to deploy another brigade's worth of army forces, and national police brigade down there to assist in the plan that he crafted with his national security advisory team to put a stop to, really, what I think is -- I know it's characterized on the news as largely JAM and special groups, but frankly, a lot of what's going on at Basra is just pure old criminal activity out there, and people wanting to take advantage of the fact that they can get away with breaking the rule of law.

So I think they're trying to reinstate law and order down there and make sure that some of the Iranian influence that perhaps has gotten a foothold in Basra doesn't take hold.

And then your final question with regard to integration of the ISF about how are we planning to integrate them so that we can leverage their ability to control areas now that we're drawing down five brigade combat teams, well, that's part of what I talked about in the beginning when I said over the course of 2007 we generated 124,000 new Iraqi security forces here. And by generate, I mean that we went out on the street, we recruited folks, we put them

through the training phase, we equipped them, we armed them, we put them in units out there, and then we deployed them to where they needed to be.

We'll continue that process throughout this year as we got through continuing to build the remainder of what we call the Iraqi counterinsurgency force. And so we'll continue to build both police and military forces so that they're able to do just that -- to take up the slack where we are pulling out coalition forces, so that the Iraqis once again are in an increasingly better position to step up to the plate and take the lead in many areas of the country. MR. HOLT: Okay. And DJ?

Q Yes, sir. It's DJ Elliott with the Long War Journal.

I had two areas I wanted to talk about. How much development is there on the Iraqi logistics side? I mean, I keep seeing (peace ?) units standing up, but I'm not seeing so much on the logistics growing.

And second, the ISOF. What are they growing to?

COL. FULLER: Okay, on the logistics side, this will be a big focus item this year for us, and as you probably have read, as we were trying to put 13 divisions in the field, particularly for the Iraqi army, and several hundred thousand Iraqi police, really the focus in the last couple or three years has been getting the actual shooters out there on the street -- the policemen and the soldiers. And we were not able to focus as much as we would have liked to on the logistics posture of the Iraqi security forces.

This year we're going to correct that and we're going to move forward to develop for each division unit in the Iraqi army an associated logistics support unit that will be stood up -- right now, with current plans, by the end of 2008 -- that will handle all of their classes of supply, their maintenance, their life-support issues for all of the Iraqi divisions. And on the police side, we're going to do the same thing by standing up a sustainment brigade for the national police, and that really gets us at the tactical level in solving some of the logistics problems.

The police out in the provinces are very similar to what you might find in our county and state police out there where they're very much handled by the local government, and handle most of their logistics from the local economy. So at the tactical level, we'll make those improvements.

At the operational level, we have a huge partnership ongoing with the Iraqis at Taji National Depot, whereby we'll establish this year 37 different shops and facilities there that range from small arms repair and assessment facilities to wheeled vehicle repair facilities to heavy vehicles like tanks and armored vehicle repair facilities, generator repair, mechanic training, driver training, cook training. You name it, we've got 37 different shops and facilities that will stand up at a place called the Taji National Depot this year, to include an ammunition depot as part of that that'll handle all the ammunition at the national level.

And then we'll continue on a similar azimuth, although not quite as robust, on the ministry of interior side, with expansion plans at the Baghdad police college where many of their warehouses are, to warehouse and store their goods and the services that the police forces use, as well as we'll work in partnership with another warehouse complex at Abu Ghraib warehouse, to build an

MOI annex so that the police equipment and supplies coming in can be more quickly distributed.

So those are a number of initiatives this year, and our hope is that we'll see some significant improvements across the board with the logistics capabilities of both police and military forces this coming year. So hopefully, that answers a little bit about that.

On the ISOF side, this year we will expand the Iraqi special ops forces by one additional brigade, and that brigade will be regionally located. It'll have one commando battalion at Basra, one commando battalion out in Anbar province at a place called al Assad; it'll have a commando battalion in the Diyala province and a commando battalion up in Mosul, in the Ninevah province.

Those four battalions will create a second Iraqi special operations forces brigade that will be supported by a logistics unit called a general support unit that will support those four battalions specifically, as well as the existing brigade that's in place today. And then on the air force side, in August we'll begin training Iraqi helicopter MI-17 pilots for night vision missions, as well as special operations missions to fly in conjunction with the Iraqi special ops forces.

So at the end of the day, we'll have two ISOF brigades and a general support unit, which is a logistics unit, supporting them, and some helicopter support from the Iraqi air force.

I hope that answers your questions --

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Megan.

Q Yes, of the 90,000 Sons of Iraq, how many of them have been integrated into the Iraqi security forces thus far, and how many do you expect this year to be integrated?

COL. FULLER: Okay, with regard to the Sons of Iraq, Megan, as you know, this has been called several things. It started as the Anbar Awakening, concerned local citizens. The latest moniker for them is the Sons of Iraq.

Right now we've got in the neighborhood of 80,000 Sons of Iraq that have signed up, and if you can imagine yourself at a concert where you hire people, when a big concert comes in town, to be local security kind of folks at a concert, that's kind of what these folks do in their local neighborhoods.

Many of them are not qualified physically to join the Iraqi security forces because they're old, they're infirm, whatever the case may be. But they're extremely helpful when it comes to pointing out who might be al Qaeda or a special group member or a plain old criminal that's implanting IEDs or caching arms and munitions and what not, or extorting and blackmailing and murdering people. So they're very useful in terms of a neighborhood kind of watch.

Right now, to date, all of those who are qualified to join physically and want to join the Iraqi security forces, can do whenever they want to. They can just go get recruited and join up and they don't have to remain as Sons of Iraq.

We have about a little over 5,000 of them now in Baghdad that we are running through the process, that have met the qualifications -- we think that as a group, Sons of Iraq group -- want to join the police forces here in Baghdad. And we expect 1 April that those little over 5,000 will be incorporated into the existing police forces here in Baghdad. And then finally, the goal of the government of Iraq is to transition up to perhaps 20 percent of the Sons of Iraq into the security forces over time. And then the rest of those who can't qualify or don't want to be a policeman or a soldier or an airman are looking at programs much like our vo-tech schools, to get them trained to do other things, whether it be welding, carpentry, automobile repair, you name it, to get them trained and have a viable skill set so that once they leave the Sons of Iraq business and their services are no longer required, that they have a viable employment alternative that will keep them off the streets and out of criminal activities, if that's all they feel like they've got to fall back on.

Does that help answer your question?

Q It does. Can you speak to kind of the accusations of sectarianism within the ministry of the interior and defense? What's being done to kind of alleviate the Sunni fears that they're not going to be integrated into security forces?

COL. FULLER: Well, there are accusations of that kind that abound, and some of them, frankly, probably have merit and some of them, frankly, probably don't. I know that there are many senior leaders in the government of Iraq that are very concerned about sectarian bias and work very hard to put it down.

But as you probably well can imagine, just as in our own country, although it's not sectarian, we certainly have racial issues and other issues that still, in some parts of the country, are a problem. And so this is something they're going to have to work through, and it's something that we pay very close attention to.

And if we get wind of it, we share the information and General Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker, are very quick to write a letter to Prime Minister Maliki or any other senior leader in the government of Iraq to point out accusations or allegations of this nature.

And to date, we have seen some pretty good success with once that's been exposed, if it is going on, of them taking some action towards that. But I can't tell you that this is an issue that is -- one we ought not to be worried about. We should. It is something we have to watch out for, and it's something that they are going to have to deal with culturally over time.

And it's one of those enduring problems that, frankly, it's going to take them a lot of years to work through the sectarian biases that have spawned over the course of multiple generations, not only here in Iraq but in several other places in the Middle East.

Q And -- I'm sorry, do you mind if I follow up with one more question?

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead. Q I had -- (inaudible) -- last week and they'd mentioned that the Sons of Iraq that we're currently paying for are included in the budget, in the Iraqi budget, for next year. So does that mean

that these vo-tech programs that you're referring to, is that the budgetary item that they're talking about?

COL. FULLER: Well, the budget for next year for Iraq, just so you understand their process, they don't quite plan as far out as our government does. They will start building their 2009 budget come August of this year.

We have asked them, and we are working in partnership right now, to transition the Sons of Iraq, at least initially, under the control of the ministry of interior. And we are working -- even as we speak, we're planning, in conjunction with the Iraqis on how much money they need to put in their budget so that we can transition the contracts that are now largely paid for with U.S. dollars and aid into a government of Iraq budget line in the ministry of defense as we go through this.

So it'll be a partnership, is the bottom line. We hope to do some pilot programs this year where we start the transition this year and they'll probably have to do their version of a supplemental to pay for it, and we'll work through the challenges associated with that.

But we expect to do a couple of pilot programs and then begin to start transitioning them in earnest in 2009, as they build their new budget and they get that approved and start working through.

And conceptually, the government of Iraq has agreed to that. They're really kind of anxious to take over the program and want to get on with it. We've just got to make sure that we have the conditions set to make sure they do it successfully and it doesn't become something that causes the Sons of Iraq to quit what they're doing, which is to provide great eyes and ears out there in the local neighborhoods and giving us a lot of tips about where bad guys are.

So we'll work through this very carefully in a partnership, with a goal of having to transition to them in earnest next year.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time.

First off, you've provided a great deal of tremendous information and I was wondering if we could get some of the PowerPoint presentations, the unclassified ones that you have so we can start to get out that word a lot better. Because to actually talk facts and figures is something which we're really lacking over here in the States.

And then my second question would be could you talk a little bit to the actual facts on the ground, as you're intimating, about the incoming Iranian rockets today in Baghdad, and then talk a little bit about what the objectives are down in Basra, how things are going. Because over there in the States, there comes -- every hour there's a conflicting newspaper report about -- people are just guessing about what's going on, and nobody really knows.

COL. FULLER: Yeah. Well, let me take Basra first, and just say, A, this is an Iraqi-conceived operation and plan. The coalition is providing some limited support to Prime Minister Maliki and his plan down there. But frankly,

other than some of our MIT teams on the ground with their Iraqi partner units, this is not something that we planned, or I could really give you a lot of details on.

So frankly, I'm watching BBC over here to make sure I stay up on what's going on in Basra, because this is an Iraqi op, and they're taking it on and doing it themselves. And yeah, we've got some spotty reports based upon some of the limited support we're feeding them.

And so although it can be frustrating for folks back at home, because you're saying, wow, what's going on? I really want to know. The other side of that coin is hey, this is a good-news story. This is something they planned, that they're executing. This is what we've been trying to train them to do, encouraging them to do. It's what democracy's all about.

So I think this is one, collectively, we're going to have to sit together, Derek (sic), and watch and see how it unfolds. And I wish I could give you some more information, but I can't, other than what I just told you.

As far as the rocket attacks here in the IZ, that's nothing new. Over the course of the last months I've been here, that's a well-known tactic used by al Qaeda and special groups both. They like the rockets because they can put them on a rail, light a fuse and leave them, and then any kind of counter-battery or air weapons teams or whatever, if they find the site, then there's obviously no one there.

So yeah, this is a pretty routine occurrence. They've been a little bit heavier the last few days. There's a lot of speculation that because of the fighting down in Basra that that could be one cause for it. Who knows? It might be just because the first day of spring has arrived and, you know, they're ready to come out. I don't know.

But we do know this: although the situation -- security situation has improved significantly, and you can look at every statistic and tell that, that it's improved significantly since last year, this is just another indicator to what we have known for a long time. The war is not over. There's a fight that's still going to go on. There is still an insurgency here that is alive and well, that has got a number of terrorist groups and, frankly, a whole lot of just plain old criminals trying to take advantage of the situation here, that we're still going to have to help our Iraqi partners to deal with.

And so I'd just like to make that point. Yeah, the situation is a heck of a lot better, but the war ain't over. So -- I got it.

And with regard to the PowerPoint, I would say you guys request whatever you want from Multi-National Forces Iraq and their public affairs folks, I'm sure, will be happy to release whatever General Petraeus has approved for release.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And you guys could just e-mail me. I will forward that up, and we will get you back what we can get back.

Do we have any follow-up questions? We've got a just a few minutes left here. Q I've got one --

Q Yes, sir --

Q Well, you go ahead.

Q Okay. Sir, I had one -- how is the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and the -- or, how are the Iraqi army, Iraqi police and ministry of defense cooperating to target al Qaeda and Ansar al-Sunna in Nineveh province?

COL. FULLER: In Ninevah? Okay. Well, they have established recently -- and this was another government of Iraq initiative -- a Ninevah operations command. That Ninevah operations command places under the command and control of one single commander all of the forces in Ninevah, whether they're army, whether they're police, whether they're national police, whether they're -- whoever they are, they work for one guy up there. And so that makes the command and control line a little bit easier.

And then they are working collectively -- and there are different intelligence organizations in MOI and MOD and coalition to fuse the intelligence up there, to make sure that they are identifying and vetting -- and it goes through a detailed vetting process for every target that they've got up there, that gets, in some cases, all the way to the prime minister for approval before it happens, and there's many layers in between to make sure that it's looked at properly. And even the coalition has the chance to weigh in on that.

So they work -- in fact, this is one of the amazing things about how well they do work in this area -- and honestly, I would say in some cases their ability, at least in one of the intelligence disciplines, which is HUMINT, they're far better than we are, because they speak the language, they know the people, they know the culture, they have the contacts, and they are really good at pulling out those sources and putting together a picture that then becomes actionable.

And so I think we'll continue to see that process in action, and work, and I don't think that Mosul and the Ninevah province will remain a safe haven for al Qaeda or any other terrorist, for that very reason, for very long, because simply they can't hide forever up there, and they'll find them and eventually ferret them out.

MR. HOLT: And DJ, you had one?

Q Yeah. I was wondering what are they looking to build the Iraqi air force up to? I saw a report in December's 9010 talking about 38 squadrons. I'm wondering what sort of mix we're looking at here.

COL. FULLER: Well, 38 squadrons doesn't sound right -- (Cross talk.)

Q Yeah. (Laughs.)

COL. FULLER: Right now, there's about 1,300 of them right now in seven squadrons, which a couple of them are training squadrons out there. And by the end of 2009, we're looking to be at about 2,600, doubling the size of the Iraqi air force, and up to 10 squadrons of them.

Now, unlike our military, or at least our Army, helicopters are not part of the army. They're part of the Iraqi air force. So a couple of those are rotary-wing helicopter squadrons. There's a squadron of C-130s which -- doesn't have many of them. It's only got three.

Then they've got training squadrons and ISR squadrons out there that are mostly light aircraft -- King Air, Caravans, that kind of stuff -- that can carry some ISR platforms and what not. So they've got cargo, they've got intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and then they've got some troop lift capability out there.

As they go into 2009, they're looking to buy a light attack aircraft that can also support -- a squadron of those that can support counterinsurgency operations.

They're looking to do that with their own money, by the way, and build that up.

So I'd say they're going to double in size and go up to about 10 squadrons, all designed to fight the counterinsurgency fight with light platforms, no jets, no MiGs, no nothing like that, at least not for the foreseeable future, but to support the forces they've got out there in the fight.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yes, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And we're about out of time here. Do you have any closing comments for us, sir?

COL. FULLER: Well, I'd like to just say a couple of things. First of all, thanks for all of you all's support back at home. It means the world to the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who are deployed around the world in tough situations, and having the support of people back at home just really means a lot to us.

I'd like to just reinforce that we really are seeing an improvement in the security situation here in Iraq and we're taking every opportunity to leverage and maximize the potential of that security improvement and consolidate the gains that we have here.

And although security has improved, like I said, the war's not over. People all the time back at home say well, hey, when's it going to be over? When are you going to be done? Well, I don't know when it's going to be done. I mean, insurgents are kind of that way. They don't like to share their plans with you and there's a lot of variables, many factions, and whatnot. But I know you can't just draw a linear projection line out there and guess when a conflict like this might be over. And so it'll be over when it's over.

And finally I would say yeah, I've told you a lot of success stories about Iraqi security forces. There are still problems out there. I don't want to say that they're not unblemished. There are some challenges out there. They're continuing to improve. We've still got a lot of work to do in the areas -- one of them you all described, logistics. A lot of work to do in terms of leaders. As you might imagine, when you grow forces this quickly, finding qualified and experienced leaders to lead these men into battle and women into battle is a challenge that we continue to work through. Sectarianism will continue, probably, for a couple of generations here, to be a problem. And then of course, as in many developing countries, corruption is always a problem that we are continually dealing with.

So those are things that we're going to continue to hit hard this year and continue to work on, and we're going to continue, in my judgment, to see some significant improvement in the capability and the quantities of Iraqi security forces out there. And we're keeping our fingers crossed that they're going to step up and take control of this battle space that our brigades are leaving, and that they'll do a job similar to the one that it appears that they're about to have unfold down in Basra down here, as they're executing an op all on their own with very limited support from us.

So I'd like to say one more time, thanks again. Appreciate you all's support.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. Colonel Mike Fuller. He's the chief of staff for Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq. Thank you for joining us, sir, and perhaps we can speak again.

COL. FULLER: Okay. Thank you very much. Would love to.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

END.